Photospot:

First photographs of Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* in the field from Africa and a request for observations

Volker Salewski

Premières photos du Phragmite aquatique *Acrocephalus paludicola* sur le terrain en Afrique. Le Phragmite aquatique *Acrocephalus paludicola* est le seul passériforme mondialement menacé nichant en Europe continentale. La localisation des sites de stationnement et quartiers d'hivernage en Afrique s'avère essentielle à la conservation de l'espèce mais est gênée par le manque de connaissances de cette espèce rare de la part des observateurs. L'auteur présente probablement les premières photos de l'espèce dans son habitat naturel en Afrique de l'Ouest et décrit les critères d'identification principaux, surtout par rapport au Phragmite des joncs *A. schoenobaenus*. Finalement, un appel est lancé aux observateurs pour envoyer toutes leurs données à l'Équipe de Conservation du Phragmite aquatique de BirdLife International.

Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* is the only globally threatened passerine species that breeds in continental Europe. Formerly more widespread, its population decreased dramatically during the 20th century (Flade & Lachmann 2008). The species is a migrant, spending the non-breeding season in sub-Saharan Africa, but until recently no wintering areas were known. In 2007 an important non-breeding site was discovered around Djoudj National Park in northern Senegal (Salewski *et al.* 2009) and in 2011 a second wintering site was found in Mali (Poluda *et al.* in press). In order to implement a conservation strategy for Aquatic Warblers during the non-breeding season, the species' precise wintering areas in Africa must be identified. However, finding the species requires knowledge of its preferred habitats and identification may present a challenge to observers unfamiliar with the species. To my knowledge, there are no photographs of Aquatic Warblers in their natural habitat on the wintering grounds. In January 2010, several Aquatic Warblers were photographed in the Djoudj area. These photographs are presented here along with a discussion of identification criteria to aid searches for Aquatic Warblers in suitable habitat throughout West Africa.

Figure 1. Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*; the distinct well-defined stripe on the crown is characteristic (beware of first-year Sedge Warblers *A. schoenobaenus* showing this feature!), as is the very narrow ill-defined pale lores, Djoudj area, Senegal, January 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Phragmite aquatique *Acrocephalus paludicola* ; la nette bande médiane étroite et jaunâtre sur la calotte est caractéristique (attention aux Phragmites des joncs *A. schoenobaenus* de 1ère année présentant ce trait !), ainsi que les lores pâles très étroits et mal définis, zone du Djoudj, Sénégal, janvier 2010 (Volker Salewski)

A. paludicola is a small brownish-buff warbler with heavily streaked upperparts and a striped head, and is similar to the very common Sedge Warbler *A. schoenobaenus*, with which it co-occurs. The head pattern of Aquatic Warbler is characterised by a distinct buffish-white supercilium and a well-marked whitish central crown-stripe (Fig. 1). In general, Sedge Warblers lack such a distinct pale stripe on the crown, but in first-winter birds it can be quite obvious. Sedge Warblers often possess more pronounced black lores (Fig. 2) than Aquatic Warblers (Fig. 1). In addition, Aquatic Warblers are brighter overall and more yellow-toned (Fig. 3), whereas Sedge Warblers are more brownish (Fig. 2). Although Sedge Warblers possess some dark mantle streaking (Fig. 2), this character is never as developed as in Aquatic Warbler, which also has two distinct whitish-buff lines on the sides (Fig. 4). In Aquatic

Figure 2. Freshly-moulted Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*; this bird is distinguished from Aquatic Warbler *A. paludicola* by the dark lores, the brownish and only faintly streaked mantle, the unmarked tawny-brown rump, the lack of fine streaking on the flanks and the greyish legs, Djoudj National Park, Senegal, February 2007 (Volker Salewski)

Phragmite des joncs *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* fraîchement mué ; cet oiseau se distingue du Phragmite aquatique *A. paludicola* par les lores sombres, le manteau brunâtre et peu rayé, le croupion brun-jaunâtre uniforme, l'absence de fines rayures sur les flancs, et les pattes grisâtres, Parc National du Djoudj, Sénégal, février 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Warblers, the mantle streaking continues onto the rump (Fig. 4), whereas in Sedge Warbler the rump has a uniform warm tawny-brown tone (Fig. 2). Aquatic Warbler is finely streaked over the breast and flanks (Figs. 3, 5), unlike adult Sedge Warblers (Fig. 2). Although juvenile Sedge Warbler can also show some streaking on the breast and flanks, this is never as contrasting as on Aquatic Warbler. Finally, the legs of Aquatic Warbler are pinkish (Figs. 3, 5), whereas those of Sedge Warbler are greyish (Fig. 2).

Several Afrotropical bird species may show some of the same features as Aquatic Warbler, including the streaked appearance or distinct white supercilium and, in some species, even the whitish coronal stripe. Examples include females or eclipse males of some weavers, queleas and whydahs. However, all of these are large-billed and they lack the warbler's skulking behaviour. Some cisticolas potentially occur syntopically with Aquatic Warbler, but all of them lack the latter species' distinct head pattern. When searching for Aquatic Warbler familiarity with its

Figure 3. Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*; note the warm colour, the fine streaking on the flanks, and the pinkish legs, whilst the pointed rectrices are also characteristic of this species, Djoudj area, Senegal, January 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Phragmite aquatique *Acrocephalus paludicola* ; noter la couleur chaude, les flancs finement striés et les pattes rosâtres, tandis que les rectrices pointues sont également caractéristiques de cette espèce, zone du Djoudj, Sénégal, janvier 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Figure 4. Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*; although this bird is partially obscured by vegetation and the head is barely visible, the contrasting dark streaking on the mantle, the whitish-buff stripes on the 'shoulders', together with the streaks on the rump, characterise the species, Djoudj area, Senegal, January 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Phragmite aquatique *Acrocephalus paludicola* ; bien que l'oiseau soit partiellement caché par la végétation et que la tête soit à peine visible, les rayures sombres bien marquées dessus, les nettes « bretelles » chamois encadrant le manteau, en combinaison avec le croupion strié, caractérisent l'espèce, zone du Djoudj, Sénégal, janvier 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Figure 5. Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola*; although the central coronal stripe is not clearly visible, the contrasting dark streaks on the mantle, the fine streaks on the flanks and the pinkish legs identify this individual, Djoudj area, Senegal, January 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Phragmite aquatique *Acrocephalus paludicola* ; bien que la bande médiane sur la calotte ne soit pas clairement visible, le dessus aux rayures sombres bien marquées, les flancs finement striés et les pattes rosâtres permettent d'identifier cet individu, zone du Djoudj, Sénégal, janvier 2010 (Volker Salewski)

song (Chappuis 2000) will be useful as, at least in January–February, Aquatic Warblers in the Djoudj area regularly sing in the early morning (Fig. 6).

Based on observations in the Djoudj area, Aquatic Warblers exclusively occupy vast, waterlogged open grassy marshes with very few or no bushes or trees. Favoured areas are characterised by relatively high coverage of *Scirpus littoralis* and *Sporobolus robustus*, and moderate salinity (Fig. 7). In addition to the Djoudj area, further wintering areas are expected to occur in the Senegal Valley, in the temporary lakes and flooded marshes of southern Mauritania, as well as in the Inner Niger Delta in Mali (Buchanan *et al.* 2011). Nevertheless, Aquatic Warblers can be expected at any site on migration. In Africa, the species has already been recorded in *Tamarix* bushes in coastal dunes, in papyrus stands within a hotel garden, in date palm and rice plantations, and within a mosque enclosure surrounded by dunes in the Sahara (Schäffer *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, an Aquatic Warbler mist-netted in Ghana, far to the south of any other known record (Hedenström *et al.* 1990), illustrates the capacity this species has to surprise.

Figure 6. Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* singing, Djoudj area, Senegal, January 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Phragmite aquatique *Acrocephalus paludicola* chantant, zone du Djoudj, Sénégal, janvier 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Figure 7. Habitat of Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* during the non-breeding season, Djoudj area, Senegal, January 2010 (Volker Salewski)

Habitat du site d'hivernage du Phragmite aquatique *Acrocephalus paludicola*, zone du Djoudj, Sénégal, janvier 2010 (Volker Salewski)

To date we possess only a rudimentary knowledge of the non-breeding ecology, phenology and distribution of Aquatic Warblers in Africa. It is therefore requested that observers report any records of the species to the BirdLife International Aquatic Warbler Conservation Team (www.aquaticwarbler.net/). Anyone can help collect useful information. Observers are requested to provide the following details: date and location (GPS data if possible), together with a short habitat description (e.g. reeds adjacent to a river, *Scirpus* marsh in a floodplain, rice field, including whether there was open water and its depth), a description of behaviour (e.g. foraging, singing), and the main features used to identify the bird. Photographs will be extremely helpful even if the bird was distant, as are sound-recordings which can be made with most mobile phones in the absence of more professional equipment.

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Dept. of Behavioural Biology, University Osnabrück, Barbarastr. 11, 49076 Osnabrück, Germany. E-mail: volker.salewski@biologie.uni-osnabrueck.de

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